

NEVER QUIT

Story and photos by Tech. Sgt. Cecilio M. Ricardo Jr.

Airman Christopher Peters battles to remain calm during the water portion of the course. To learn breathing techniques, the recruits' masks were filled with water and sprayed with a hose.

Whether marching four miles carrying 50-pound rucksacks, running six miles in under 45 minutes, swimming 4,000 meters within 80 minutes, or snorkel-breathing while being barked at, pararescue recruits willingly endure whatever it takes and more to earn the right to be called a PJ.

They are the Air Force's elite rescue force whose sole mission is to recover downed aircrews behind enemy lines. This selectively recruited band of Airmen is one of the most formidably fit and mentally tuned collection of human beings the Air Force has to offer.

"We are the only dedicated rescue and recovery specialists in the Department of Defense (who) search, rescue and recover anywhere and anytime," said 1st Lt. Kevin Kirby from the 342nd Training Squadron.

The 10-week Pararescue Indoctrination course at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, is the first step to becoming a PJ. For class 06-003, only 20 of the 64 recruits who began training reached the fifth week. This week included the feared Extended Training Day — an additional grueling 17 to 21 hours in which on average 70 percent of PJ recruits wash out of the course. Burdened with sleep deprivation and severe exhaustion, recruits are bombarded with a variety of physical tasks.

Class of 06-003 began their ETD at around 4 p.m. after completing a full training day. Their first task — carry a massive log that required 15 recruits to lift. But carrying it wasn't enough, they also had to march with it and do squats and sit-ups. Trading the log for 50-pound rucksacks, the recruits' next task was a fast-paced four-mile march on an unforgiving terrain. At 6 p.m., two recruits fell out with ankle injuries. The

rest were confronted with the challenge of an obstacle course and two-mile sprint.

Though 17 hours had passed since ETD began, it was the next few hours that were feared most — the water portion.

"The anticipation of utter misery was the worst feeling in the world," Airman 1st Class Michael Lauria said.

The recruits knew that most would quit in the water.

In drenched BDUs, the recruits performed Ten Ups, an exhausting exercise that combines push-ups with diving and breathing exercises. After the fifth dive, fatigue was showing and several popped up early for air. Wading instructors attacked like sharks, yelling and splashing water at the recruits to get back underwater. One recruit swam to the end of the pool, surrounded by instructors yelling at him to quit. With a bullhorn in his face and tears streaming down his cheeks, he answered back in defeat and embarrassment, "I quit!"

That night, five other recruits bowed out of training.

At 5 a.m., after marching in circles for two miles with the log back on their shoulders, the remaining recruits were finally released for chow and maybe an hour of sleep before they had to prepare for the next training at 7:30 a.m.

"It's all worth it knowing that someday I will be able to work with a great bunch of high-speed PJs saving lives," said Airman Lauria, who graduated. "Nurturing the desire to help others really got me through it all."

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For more photos check out www.af.mil/library/perspective/asp.



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